

FACTS ABOUT OUR FOOD

~TURKEYS~

Turkeys are intensively reared for efficient production of meat. The goal is to grow the biggest bird in the shortest time for the lowest cost.

❑ OVERVIEW

The life of a turkey is much like that of a “broiler” or meat chicken. They are housed with thousands of other turkeys in poultry barns, which often have no natural light and very poor ventilation. In the wild, turkeys will roam widely, looking for vegetation, seeds and grains to eat. However, on the farm they are treated like production units, and are fed and watered automatically by machines. In 2003, Canada slaughtered **19.7 million** turkeys.

❑ LIFE SENTENCE ON THE FACTORY FARM

➤ GENETIC SELECTION

Between 1996 and 2003, turkey production remained relatively constant at 148 million kilograms. However, the number of turkeys on farms actually decreased by approximately 9%, from 21.6 million to 19.7 million. This suggests that turkeys weigh more on average now than they did in 1996. One reason for this is that they are being bred to gain more weight in order to be meatier, and therefore, more appealing to consumers.

➤ LIFE IN THE BARN

Crowding - Turkeys live in extremely crowded, barren environments. By the time they are slaughtered, if producers follow Canada’s Recommended Codes of Practice, each bird has 2 square feet of space. That’s less than the size of a newspaper. Considering that these are ‘recommended’ codes, the amount of space each bird has may be even less. The barns become increasingly crowded as the turkeys grow. Due to the stress of overcrowding, fighting and aggression, feather pecking can result, particularly if feed rations are not adjusted properly as the birds grow. As a result, turkeys usually have their **beaks sliced off** with a heated blade or powerful laser beam without anaesthetic so they do not damage other birds with their pecking.

Litter Burn & Foul Air – The barn floors are covered with litter, usually wood shavings. The litter typically is not changed during the turkeys’ stay, and the result is a barn floor covered with faeces. Furthermore, turkeys do not scratch around in the litter like chickens do, which results in a litter that is even more pungent.

Lighting Abuse – Quite often there are no windows to let in natural light. This is to benefit turkey producers, because too much light is known to increase aggression in turkeys. Therefore the turkeys spend their entire lives in virtual darkness.

➤ PHYSICAL AILMENTS

Factory farmed turkeys can suffer from a rash of physical problems. Because turkeys are forced to stand around on wet, dirty litter, they are susceptible to foot **ulcerations**, resulting in lameness. Turkeys are bred to gain weight to be extra meaty, and in the process are fed high-nutrient feed. Consequently, their joints and muscles are often unable to support their weight, once again resulting in lameness.

Sometimes male turkeys have their snoods removed. (The snood is the part of the turkey’s wattle arising from the forehead and lying over the upper beak.) They de-snood turkeys as a way to reduce cannibalism, and the procedure can result in acute pain. Even though turkeys are de-beaked, they can still peck at each other. Eye injuries are not an uncommon problem, and these injuries can lead to infections, and sometimes blindness.



*Turkeys during Slaughter
Photo Courtesy of Farm Sanctuary*

Turkeys can suffer from many other physical ailments, such as respiratory diseases, liver damage and other infections, all of which can result in mortality.

➤ **BREEDING**

Some turkeys are kept as parent stock to produce fertile eggs from which meat turkeys hatch. However, because turkeys have been bred to have very broad breasts, the males (toms) are not flexible enough to breed females naturally, and so artificial insemination (AI) is used.

The breeders are kept in densely packed single-sex pens. Often the toms will be kept on one farm and the hens on another. Semen is extracted from the toms, often twice a week. The semen will then be taken to the hen farm and the hens are inseminated, often once a week. Breeding hens can be artificially inseminated up to **30 times** in their first laying year. They may then be force-molted, which is the practice of starving mature hens to increase production, and inseminated 30 times in their second laying year. The handling of the birds during AI is stressful, and the fact that natural breeding is prevented leads to frustration.

➤ **TRANSPORTATION**

When turkeys reach “maturity”, or in other words, are ready for slaughter, they must be transported to slaughterhouses. The process by which they are caught and loaded into trucks is extremely stressful, particularly for an animal like a turkey, who by nature has a nervous disposition. Catchers pick them up by their feet and shove them into crates. Because the catchers work quickly, birds are frequently injured, resulting in bruising, broken bones, and internal injuries.

Slaughterhouses are often a long distance away, which means turkeys bound for slaughter may be forced to spend a long time in trucks that are often not kept warm in the winter or cool in the summer. Turkeys may be legally shipped up to 36 hours without being fed, watered or rested, according to regulations under the Health of Animals Act. The result is suffering and even death.

➤ **SLAUGHTER**

Turkeys can live up to 10 years, but on factory farms they are typically slaughtered between 12 and 26 weeks.

Upside-down Shackle - The slaughter procedure for nearly all turkeys is to suspend the birds upside-down by their feet in metal shackles on a moving line. The procedure must induce fear, as well as seriously aggravate the pain of lameness and injuries from catching. Furthermore, turkeys can weigh up to 28 kilograms at slaughter, and so the pain of being hung upside down for any amount of time is considerable.

Improper Stunning - After being strapped into metal shackles upside-down, turkeys are supposed to be rendered unconscious by immersion in an electrified water stun bath prior to having their throats cut. This is followed by immersion in scalding water to loosen their feathers. However, not all birds are properly stunned. Birds not stunned in the water bath feel their throats being slit, and because some birds are not in the proper position, they do not get their throats slit. This means some turkeys go into the scald bath **alive and conscious**. A more stress-free killing method is to kill the birds using an inert gas while they are still in the transport crates. They can then be hung on the shackles and have their throats slit after they are dead.

□ **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

The **Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals** is working to end this cruelty. You can help make a difference.

- Don't buy factory-farmed turkeys. Choose free-range turkey that is *Certified Organic*. These turkeys are produced in higher-welfare systems where they can behave more naturally.
- Eliminate or reduce the amount of turkey you eat, and replace it with other protein-rich foods, such as tofu and beans.
- Ask your local grocery store to stock alternatives to factory-farmed meat, eggs and dairy, and to ensure that these alternatives are clearly labelled (contact information, guidelines and suggestions are on our website).



Free-range Turkeys

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